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Creating a Strong Family We Are One

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

A friend is talking about the loss of her husband of many years: "I never thought about it much while he was alive, but now that he's gone, I see we were like an evergreen tree. We were one trunk with two growth points, two crowns, two main branches. A storm has come up and violently torn one of the branches off the tree."

She wipes away a tear, and continues: "The storm has left a terrible, ripped scar down the side of the remaining branch of the tree, leaving the remaining branch vulnerable to future storms and the ravages of disease and time."

She was speaking metaphorically, and yet the metaphor was real. Grasping her side she said, "It hurts so much in here. It just aches and aches."

This aching feeling that all human beings experience sometime in life is part of what we call grief. In strong families, we place a very, very high value on each other and are committed to our well-being as a family and as individuals. In our most intimate and honest moments together we say, "We are one. We are family."

The level of this commitment is so powerful that at times we shrink back from it and become uncomfortable trying to express it to each other. Writers for television and the movies witness this discomfort among friends and loved ones, and it becomes an element of many comedies and dramas that are produced.

The fashionable term for it today is "irony," and an "ironic" bent toward life seems to be appreciated. Rather than speaking simply and directly, we use humor or subtle sarcasm, saying the exact opposite of what we mean to say. Though I find myself being ironic on occasion in my discussions with other people, especially younger people, I end up feeling somewhat uncomfortable and dishonest for doing so.

Irony seems like a mask. A cool and casual way to hide one's genuine, deep-down feelings. As the years go by, I still have difficulty expressing honest and positive emotion but taking off the mask does feel

better, more true to myself and my loved ones and friends.

The benefits of long-term commitment to one's family are considerable. The family gives us shelter from the storms of life, and family memories can be profound.

"I don't know what I would do without Sarah," Donald notes. "I've been with her since we were teenagers. She knows me better than anyone on earth. She experienced so many of the important events of my life with me. We speak in code: 'Remember when.?' and 'That's just like Fred,' and so forth. Just a short word or phrase will recall some extraordinarily important event in our lives that no one else shares with us. If I lost her, I would lose our history together. I would lose so much of me."

Donald lets his wife know how committed he is. In a recent birthday card he wrote, "I will love you forever."

Though the benefits of long-term commitment to each other are great, the price we pay for this high value we place on our loved ones is not small, by any stretch of the imagination. When we lose a cherished loved one, the feelings of loss can be overwhelming. These feelings, though they may soften over time, still reside in our private souls. A warm and sad spirit. An undercurrent of melancholy that we carry with us as long as we live.

This side of us needs to be welcomed, honored and respected, because it is just as much a part of our basic humanity as the happy and joyful side of us that also defines who we are. We can, indeed, live quite comfortably with both happiness and sadness and are foolish not to do so.

Our friend Al is grieving over the loss of the love of his life, Jeannine. She has been gone almost a year now. Life is getting better, a bit more tolerable at this point, but it will never be the same. He honors his lost partner and captures her spirit beautifully by placing a framed photograph of her when she was 2 years old in the living room chair where she sat and talked with him through their years together.

"Marcy (their daughter) dug up the old photo. She had it touched up and framed. I think it's a great photograph. Even at 2 years old, you can see Jeannine's lively spirit."

"Where are you going to put the picture?" my wife Nikki asked.

"Oh, it will stay right there in her chair. I can talk with her better that way," he chuckled.

Al's feeling of oneness with Jeannine will continue for the rest of his life.

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